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# IS SCHOLARSHIP HOSTILE TO RELIGION?

GERALD BIRNEY SMITH

Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, University of Chicago

Author of "Social Idealism and The Changing Theology"

*At this time of year thousands of young men and women as well as thousands of parents are thinking about college. The problems which these future students face are not quite the same which, for the moment, concern their parents, for fathers and mothers are anxious that their children shall come out of college with stronger moral purposes and higher ideals, with deepened faith and truer loyalty to God than were theirs before they entered. Are these young lives to be injured religiously by coming into contact with scholarship? Professor Smith's discussion should go far to reassure those who look upon our colleges as hotbeds of religious doubt.*

There is a widespread feeling among devout evangelical Christians that modern scholarship is somehow dangerous to religious faith. Many a boy or girl today is warned by parent and by pastor against the "skeptical" influences of a college course. The critical investigations which are undertaken by modern scholars are by many earnest men believed to undermine the Christian faith. It is, of course, true that in many cases the wider vision which comes with a college education is not carried over into the realm of religious faith. If one's religious ideals do not enlarge as one's conceptions of reality grow, one's education is sure to outgrow the limits of a simpler faith. Moreover, modern scientific investigation makes it inevitable that there shall be sharp questioning of some of the doctrines which have been supposed to be inalienable to religion. That religious shipwreck has been the fate of a significant number of college graduates is a fact which cannot be denied. But such shipwreck is often chargeable to

neglect of religious culture rather than to the results of scholarship. Still, when all has been said, it cannot be denied that honesty on a student's part may compel the modification or even the abandonment of beliefs which he has considered indispensable to religious faith.

There is, however, another side to the question. If scholarship is compelling modifications of certain doctrines, it is also true that scholarship is making its positive contribution toward a better understanding of the nature of religion and is thus making possible a scientific justification of religious faith. It is well to recognize this aspect of the matter.

## **Scholarship Has Removed a False Dilemma**

A century ago the incompatibility between traditional beliefs and rational science seemed to be so great that it was common for college students to withdraw entirely from professed Christian allegiance. Today, however, it is no

longer necessary for one to choose between intellectual honesty and adherence to organized Christianity. In a recent historical survey of Protestant thought before Kant, Professor McGiffert sums up the religious crisis of a little over a century ago in these significant words:

Mediaevalism or irreligion, this was the alternative offered by consistent Evangelicals and accepted by consistent rationalists. It is still the alternative offered and accepted by many of both schools. But in the meantime it has ceased to be the only alternative, for toward the close of the eighteenth century new influences began to be felt which have completely changed the religious situation. New conceptions of religion have emerged and have resulted in forms of Christianity congenial to the temper and discoveries of the modern age, so that it has become possible for a man to be fully in sympathy with the modern spirit and yet remain a Christian.<sup>1</sup>

Both the advocates of Christianity and their opponents in the eighteenth century were thinking of religion in abstract terms without any adequate examination of the historical facts. David Hume is usually considered by theologians as the terrible skeptic who denied the essential truths of Christianity. This is true. But what is often overlooked is the fact that his criticism was just as destructive of the so-called "natural theology" which was in vogue among cultured men who had abandoned Christianity. For it was easy to show that historic religion did not correspond to the rationalistic type any more than to the formal theological type.

The new epoch in our understanding of the nature of religion may be said to have come with the end of the eighteenth

century. At that time Herder in Germany showed that religions have a historical growth and development like other human institutions. Schleiermacher just at the turn of the century published his famous *Discourses on Religion*, in which he called attention to two important facts—that religion is rooted in our feeling of dependence upon the mysterious power which creates and sustains us; and that religion is more truly expressed in practical worship than in abstract doctrines. Following the lead of these men, scholars of the nineteenth century have collected an immense amount of data concerning religion as it actually exists in various parts of the world and at various epochs of history. The consequence is that we are able today, as men a century ago were not, to tell what religion actually is.

This study of religion in the concrete removes the dilemma which seemed to confront thinking men a century ago. We know today that there is no one exclusive form of religion. Instead, we have the most astonishing variety of belief and practice. A man may find himself out of sympathy with a certain form of religion and yet be quite in harmony with a different type. The inability to accept the faith of one's father does not necessarily mean that one is less religious than one's father. One may simply be expressing his religion in a different way. Even the faith of one's father is likely to change during his lifetime. The theologies which are being written today in Christendom are very different from those which were being written even twenty-five years ago.

<sup>1</sup> *Protestant Thought before Kant*, p. 254 (New York: Scribner, 1911).

**What Does Scholarship Say about Religion?**

1. A knowledge of the facts compels us to recognize that religion is, and always has been, a positive and fruitful element in civilization. Religion seems to be as universal and as highly valued as any other form of human aspiration and achievement. As the spade uncovers the remains of cities of the distant past, what tremendous evidence we obtain as to the interrelation between religion and all the affairs of the life of man! And though unnumbered well-developed forms of religion have perished, yet mankind persists in being religious, creating, when necessary, new forms more appropriate to the changing conditions of men. Can you understand the literature or the art of any people without an appreciation of its religion? Indeed, some of the noblest literatures of the world were born in times when a new form of religion was struggling for the means of expression by which it could conquer the minds and hearts of men. This marvelous power of the *religious life* to survive even when the *forms* of religion come to be discredited is a *fact* which every intelligent man must recognize. If therefore, we see signs of the disintegration of the theology of our fathers, we know that the passing of the older *form* of religion is one of the familiar facts of history. It does not by any means signify the passing of religion itself. There is deep in the constitution of man an insatiable longing for satisfactions which can be supplied only by religion. The scholar then, does not expect that religion will vanish. His only question is as to the form which religion will take in the future.

2. A second fact which the historical study of religion establishes is its adaptability to the changing needs of humanity. If religion were rigidly fixed in form, one might well doubt whether it would survive in a world of change. Perhaps nothing causes more useless perplexity to the college student than the idea which he often entertains that religion is an unchangeable body of doctrine. It is, indeed, one of the evidences of the preciousness of religion that after it is organized, the institutions in which it embodies its activities attempt to conserve it unchanged. The authority of divine origin is invoked upon creeds and rituals and sacraments in the endeavor to keep this precious content of religion from disintegration. But how vain such attempts are may be seen in the history of any religion. For example, the theologian Auguste Sabatier, by simply citing facts in the history of Catholicism, showed clearly that while the church claimed all the time to represent final and unchangeable truth, the content of Catholic Christianity has actually been varied to meet the varying exigencies of human development. If, following the spirit of conservation, a church succeeds in exercising too rigid an authority, religion bursts traditional bonds in such a revolution as that due to Luther or to the Wesleys. So close does religion lie to the deepest needs of man that it will not endure any separation due to artificiality in creed or practice. We must beware lest we be deceived by names. Some men have been wrongly called atheists simply because they did not conform to the traditional creed. Socrates seems to us to be genuinely religious in spirit; but he was con-

demned to death on the charge of irreligion. Emerson has sometimes been declared to be an enemy of true faith. But no one can read his essays without feeling the intense power of his religious convictions. Even those religious rites which seem to us strange and artificial can be traced in origin to certain practical efforts on the part of men to further the higher interests of life. Religion is supremely practical, and thus finds expression in ways suited to the exigencies of human experience.

3. A third conclusion drawn from a knowledge of the facts is that religion is not an intellectual abstraction, nor a universal philosophy. As a matter of fact, the only religion which really exists is to be found in the religious experience of concrete persons. The failure to recognize this fact is the besetting error of rationalism and traditionalism alike. Just as there is no such thing as friendship except in the loyalty of actual men toward each other, so there is no religion except that which exists in the life of individual men. This explains why so many of the religions of the past have perished. It was simply because there ceased to be any living men and women who solved the problems of their life by the use of certain particular religious doctrines and rituals. The religion of the ancient Egyptians stands before us recorded and described in thousands of inscriptions. But it is a dead religion because there are no longer living men who think and act in terms of its provisions. In our own day we frequently see the retention on paper of certain traditional elements of religion which nobody actually adopts and uses. The real religion of an age is to be found

in the living convictions of men and women, not in the technical documents which have been preserved. Sometimes the forms which have attained currency are so ill suited to the needs of men that real religion invents means of expression outside the churches. For example, in the seventeenth century in Germany, the state religion had become so formal and abstract that it evoked no real enthusiasm on the part of men. Spener the father of pietism, assembled little groups of laymen in his house for the purpose of engaging in prayer and the devotional study of the Bible. The *real* religion of those men was to be found in those informal gatherings rather than in the services of the established church. So, again, the formal state religion in England at the time of the Wesleys was losing its power. But the irrepressible needs of religious life found expression apart from customary and traditional channels. The result was the Methodist revival. In our land, where there is no state church, we have astonishingly varied forms of activity on the part of men who are genuinely religious, but who do not find in the older institutions of religion a satisfactory form of expression. So imperative is the religious impulse that men are constantly starting new sects or even new religions. Scholarly insight should help us to recognize genuine religion even when it appears in unconventional forms. We should always have primary regard to the concrete life of religious men rather than to any specific formulation.

### **What Is Religion?**

What is it, then, that makes a man religious? It is evident from the facts

which have been cited that some current definitions are not adequate. You cannot determine whether a man is religious or not by asking whether he has been baptized, or whether he believes in the doctrine of the Trinity, or whether he believes the Bible from cover to cover. There are plenty of people who could give a positive answer in these cases, but who would not therefore be religious. And there are also many people who would be excluded by such a standard who are genuinely religious in spirit. I think one cannot read the writings of Huxley, for example, without feeling that his was a genuinely religious soul, but that he had not discovered any adequate means by which to develop and express personal religion.

Now amid all the variety of forms are there certain traits which scientific study establishes as essentially religious? I believe that there are; and I should like to mention three which seem to me to be fundamental.

1. One essential element of religion is reverence in the presence of the mystery which surrounds our life. Worship is the natural expression of this reverence. If we trace the rites and ceremonies of religion to their source, we find that they are means of arousing in those who participate a heightened emotion and a definite sense of certain mysteries of life. To illustrate from a common occurrence today: a marriage ceremony performed in a church with religious formulae is vastly more impressive than a mere civil ceremony which simply fulfils the legal demands. The mystery underlying marriage, that old, old marvel, perpetually new, of the transformation

of life because two persons of opposite sex have discovered in their mutual acquaintance hitherto unsuspected enrichment of life, naturally and rightly finds expression in religious formulation. The reverence for this mysterious experience which seeks utterance in religious faith is a constant rebuke to the irreverent and demoralizing conceptions of sex relations which work so much human woe. So, too, the thrill of patriotism, bringing with it the discovery of a strange intoxicating sense of enlargement of life, naturally finds expression in religious form.

It is this spirit of reverence which raises man above the animals. To be able to see something more than occasions for the satisfaction of physical needs in the universe is indispensable to the higher life which we prize. To discover that the unknown mystery which surrounds us holds in store unsuspected values is a common experience. One has only to read such a book as Professor James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* to see how impoverished is the life of a man who has not cultivated the spirit of reverent imagination. If it be true in the little world of college life that one misses the best of it all if he sees nothing but the books and the course of study, if he fails to identify himself with that invisible reality which we call "university spirit," if he finds no satisfaction in the symbolic pageantry of athletic mass-meetings or no inspiration in singing college songs with his companions, is it not more significantly true that one who fails to discern the hidden poetry of the larger world is really missing the best of life? Now religion, in one form or another, interprets the

moving forces in the universe in terms which evoke our worship, and thus leads us to that attitude which is essential to initiation into the highest values of life. Religion is as intolerant of the short-sightedness which takes account of merely physical forces as is the loyal college man of the individual who finds nothing in the university except the physical equipment. Just as college spirit makes the university a living social organism, so religion makes of the universe in which we live a realm where the spiritual aspirations of man have primary rights. The attitude of reverence, of confidence in the genuineness of these higher experiences, of belief that the universe is so ordered that man's best aspirations are justified—this is one element in religion.

2. A second element in religion is its reinforcement of man's ideals by interpreting them in relation to the larger sanctions of the divine will. To the student of history, nothing is more amazing than the pathway by which man has gradually climbed from primitive animal habits to his present achievements. Bit by bit, men have ceased to be guided by animal instinct, and have created certain moral standards by which the level of life is kept high. Think of the centuries of achievement which have made possible our own moral ideals. Yet after all the centuries of striving, how easily we relapse into barbarism if the routine of life is broken. Now religion, as Professor James has so plainly shown,<sup>1</sup> is a potent means for keeping humanity true to its never-ending task of introducing higher moral control into our social life. The utili-

tarian formula that honesty is the best policy will always fail when the individual sees the chance to make more money by dishonesty. It needs something more than prudent calculation to keep most of us from frequent violation of moral standards. The great religions of the world have been concerned to reinforce these upward strivings of man. In particular, Christianity has so identified itself with morality that worship of the God of Christian faith is inconceivable unless it involves the spirit of moral sincerity. To believe that something more than personal convenience is at stake in the deciding of moral questions, to feel that loyalty to what is right brings one somehow into deeper relations to the power which makes for righteousness in the universe, to be convinced that God cares whether I am true to the best or not—this is one aspect of religion. And it would seem that morality can successfully preserve its honor and its authority over men only when interpreted in some such profound way.

3. The third element of religion is its practical capacity to create means by which reverence and idealism are wrought into experience. Life may be viewed as a great experiment in which we are feeling out into the unknown environment mystery, attempting to find the ways in which we may establish a vital connection with the forces upon which our welfare depends. The astounding success of scientific research during the past century has centered attention upon the possibility of improving our means of access to the physical forces of the universe. But man does not live by bread alone. The spiritual nature of

<sup>1</sup> *The Psychology of Religious Experience* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910).

man needs nourishment as truly as does the physical. Religion is the practical attempt of man to find such vital contact with the sources of life, that his spiritual nature may be enriched. Read the literature of devotion, and see what resources of comfort and strength are made accessible by the practice of religion.

### **The Appeal of Religion to Scholarly Men**

These are some of the facts which should be set beside those others which have played so large a part in creating the fears of those who have distrusted and opposed scientific criticism. If modern scholarship makes imperative certain changes of belief, it also makes clear that such changes are to be expected in any living religion. Only the dead religions preserve ritual and creed immutable. Once make it clear to a college student that changes are necessary whenever a religious faith encounters changed problems, and it is possible to appeal to him to take an active part in the formulation of vital ways in which religion may have a wider field of activity. Once establish the fact that, underneath the varied forms of religion, there have been ever the quest for a deeper meaning, the cultivation of a noble reverence for the mystery on which our life is dependent, and the reinforcement of the moral ideals of the race, and it becomes impossible to ignore the profundity of the religious quest.

One of the most interesting developments of recent years is the increasing number of scientific books and articles which with utmost seriousness endeavor to make clearer the real nature of religion.

To be sure, some of these treatises with splendid audacity endeavor to explain religion in terms of something not essentially religious. But even such attempts reveal how inevitably we must reckon with religion as a permanent and immensely important factor in human history. A scientific man cannot ignore it. He must explain it in some way. Scholarship has made it clear that religion is at least as deserving of serious attention as is art or literature or politics.

The practical outcome of this scientific attitude is easily seen. If it is a disgrace for a college man to be indifferent to art or literature or politics, it is no less of a discredit to his education if he is unacquainted with the vital aspects of religion. So long as religion and science were set in opposition to each other, it was possible to plead scientific honesty as an excuse for neglecting religion. But if, as is so widely recognized today, scholarship itself affirms the validity of the religious quest, and at the same time removes the false ideas of immutability which dogmatism has too long imposed upon us, the way is open for a direct summons to every educated man to play an active part in the religious life of today. We may, indeed, grant that it is harder to think through the implications of religious faith today than it used to be; that it is vastly more difficult to define God in relation to our modern universe than it was to think of him as the creator of the limited geocentric world; that the function and validity of prayer and worship are not so easily stated as in the days when men believed that the natural order could be disturbed by divine interventions. We may recognize these and a thousand



other difficulties. But are we absolved from concern about religion just because it is a difficult subject? It would indeed be a damning verdict if it should be established that educated men abandon religion primarily because there are serious difficulties to be met. But such a verdict is most unlikely. Quietly but persistently college men everywhere are responding to the call for volunteers

in the pressing work of theological reconstruction and in the practical adaptation of religion to our modern social needs. The time has come when the scientific spirit and the religious quest can walk hand in hand. The result may mean significant changes in our ways of thinking and acting; but it will mean new vigor and wider influence for the cause of religion.

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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF HEBREW WISDOM

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JOHN FRANKLIN GENUNG, PH.D., D.D., L.H.D.

Professor of Literary and Biblical Interpretation, Amherst College

Author of "The Hebrew Literature of Wisdom in the Light of Today"

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Seven words suffice St. Paul to describe the respective attitudes of the two great originative minds of the ages toward the problem of life. "Jews," he says, "demand signs, and Greeks seek wisdom." With the temperaments of both races he was thoroughly familiar; and his luminous discrimination, as Bishop Lightfoot says, "hits them off to perfection." It is to be noted, however, that he is describing a process, not a result. Neither racial cast of mind, as he goes on to intimate, fully solves the problem on its lines alone; the solution comes by a way which, though condemned by both, eventually blends their ideals of attaining their quest in one simple and concrete finality.

From very early in their history the Hebrew people were endeavoring to discover and utilize the wisdom and power of the universe, that is, to see things as they are and adjust life to them. Nor

have we any reason to think the same was less true of that far more intellectual race, the Greek. But the two started from opposite poles. In the Greek system God was the final term; a term therefore always sought, approximated nearer and nearer, and never fully found, as is typified in that mathematical figure the asymptote, wherein one line always approaches another but never meets it. The initial term was the human mind projected toward infinity; and as long as the mind grew the final goal receded. In the Hebrew system, if system it may be called, God was the initial term, a fixed postulate, never questioned, never in abeyance; and the final term, the perfection of manhood, was similarly a receding goal, until the way of it was assured by the removal of the stumbling-block and the acceptance of the supreme sign, the cross of Christ.

The two attitudes were similarly